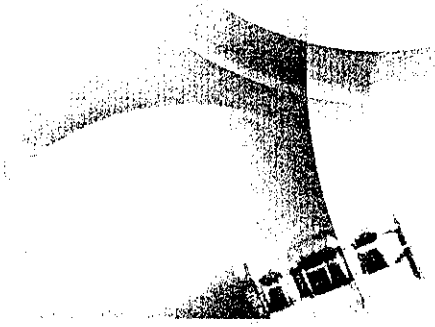
How to Conduct Collaborative Action Research



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The Structure of an Action Research Report

One of the nice things about reporting action research is the freedom you have in choosing how to present what you have learned. The professional research community has developed rules and conventions regarding scientific presentation (see, for example, the *Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association*) that, while enforcing some degree of rigor through standardization, may also stifle enthusiasm and creativity, both of which are hallmarks of collaborative action research. Since action research reports are developed by and for practitioners, the most important consideration should be to choose a method that will tell the story accurately and effectively. Many collaborative action research reports contain mixtures of media, including (but not limited to) videotapes, photographs, charts and figures, written narratives, audiotapes, and oral presentations. Whatever the method of presentation, the format of a successful report generally follows this outline:

- Introduction
- A description of the research process
- An analysis of the data
- An action plan

Each section answers important questions for your audience, and considering them together allows other educators to determine if your findings are relevant to their local circumstances.

Introduction

At the beginning of your report, you want to tell the audience about the site where the research was conducted, the focus of the research, and any pertinent characteristics of the staff and students. Fully explaining the context is extremely important. As mentioned earlier, with action research we aren't very concerned about generalizability; we are conducting the research primarily for ourselves. The purpose of the report is simply to invite our colleagues to look over our shoulders as we work. It will ultimately be up to them to determine if our findings are applicable to their setting. An introduction to an action research report might read something like this:

> This study was conducted by four members of the 5th grade team at Riverwalk Elementary School, one of thirty-seven schools in the River City School District. We are a 500-student, K–6 magnet school with students who are admitted on a first-come, first-served basis; however, our student body is required to mirror the racial composition of the city (35 percent white, 25 percent African-American, 25 percent Hispanic, 10 percent Asian). We were concerned about the comparatively low performance of our students on measures of reading comprehension, so we began an investigation of the relationship between improved comprehension and both recreational reading (free reading and library time) and classroom assignments.

A Description of the Research Process

In the second section of the report, you want to describe the research process(es) you engaged in. Whereas the introduction answered the question "Who are you and what were you studying?" this section answers the question "What did you do?" This section should clearly and concisely explain the research procedures you followed. It might sound something like this:

> We pretested all of the children on the STRC (Sagor Test of Reading Comprehension) at the end of September. During the months of October and November, all the teachers and students kept logs of all reading assigned and accomplished in and outside class. A post-test was administered the first week of December. In addition, we interviewed twenty-five randomly chosen students and conducted separate telephone interviews with their parents to determine their outside-of-school reading habits, preferences, and attitudes toward school. Each member of the research team visited each of the five 5th grade classrooms at least once during reading time to observe the instructional strategies being used. We then contrasted the data on the reading experiences of students who showed dramatic growth, moderate growth, and no growth to see if any trends or patterns were evident.

An Analysis of the Data

At this point, your audience should be clear about who you are, what you were interested in, and what you did. Whether their school is just like yours or vastly different is a matter they can extrapolate from your description of

context. This third section of the report should tell the audience what you found out. The data section of action research reports is usually more interesting than its counterpart in scientific reports because action researchers usually feel free to use more vivid means of illustration. In addition to statistics, charts, and graphs, I've seen examples of student work (from portfolios), heard segments of interviews on audiotape, and seen both videotaped portions of lessons and testimonials from teachers and students.

An Action Plan

At this stage, you should be thinking of your report as a discussion between two colleagues. As I'm listening to what your team has to say, I have received a clear picture of what your classrooms are like, the issues that concerned you, what you looked at, and what you learned. Now I want to know what you're going to do as a result. When doing an oral presentation of your research, this section of your presentation should be given the most time on the agenda. As teachers, we are all action-oriented professionals. Your analyses of the data will already have given you ideas for next steps, and any colleagues who are listening to your report will be quite interested in hearing what meaning you derived from your findings. And they will probably want to share ideas of their own about the implications of your study. I have observed hundreds of reports of collaborative action research projects, and never have I ceased to be impressed by the quality of the discussions concerning the implications of the studies.